

STANDARD: Establishing and Maintaining Worker Safety

Purpose

The purpose of this standard is to provide direction and guidance to the Children and Family Services (CFS) programs regarding establishing and maintaining worker safety, both in the office and in conducting fieldwork. This standard is intended to achieve statewide consistency in the development and application of CFS core services and shall be implemented in the context of all applicable laws, rules, and policies. The standard will also provide a measurement for program accountability.

Introduction

Worker safety is a timely and important issue in today's social service environment. Substance use, domestic violence, and environmental hazards increase the potential risks social workers face daily. Additional challenges include the geographic and social diversity within the state, and even within regions. Risk reduction in an urban setting may be dramatically different from risk reduction in a rural setting. Though risk to workers cannot be completely eliminated, it can be dramatically reduced by increasing awareness. By reducing potential risks in a planful way, social workers can focus on client and client family needs.

Standard

The purpose of this standard is to establish procedural guidelines directed toward increasing safety both in the field and in the office. Determining potential risk to workers begins with basic awareness and up-front data gathering.

Before Leaving the Office:

- A. Gather information regarding safety issues prior to initial contact whenever possible. Review file/program history, when available, prior to initial contact.

Intake is the ideal place to begin to assess worker safety. Include all information on the Presenting Issue to be assigned. Possible questions to ask referent:

1. Is there any history of violence, both reported and/or unreported to law enforcement?
2. Is any member of the family using illegal drugs or drinking alcohol in excess?
3. Is any member of the family mentally ill?
4. Are there firearms in the home?
5. Are there any vicious dogs or other animals that may pose a threat?
6. Are there known safety hazards in the home or on the property?

7. Does the referent fear anyone in the home? What do they base that fear on? Would a social worker be at risk engaging with that individual?
 8. Is anyone in the home on probation, or has a known criminal history?
- B. All Presenting Issues involving potential safety hazards will be staffed with a supervisor or team lead prior to a risk assessment worker responding.
- C. The Risk Assessment worker or Supervisor/Team Lead will request Law Enforcement assistance on all contacts where safety hazards have been reported.
1. When Law Enforcement is unable, or unwilling, to respond within the required timeframe, Supervisors/Team Leads shall write a Variance to reflect the request for Law Enforcement assistance, their ability to respond, and the plan as to when Law Enforcement will be available for response.
 2. In situations where Law Enforcement is unwilling to assist the worker the Program Manager, or his/her designee, will contact Law Enforcement to enlist their assistance.
 3. In the event Law Enforcement continues to not assist the worker in responding to a potentially risky situation, the social worker and their Supervisor/Team Lead shall consult with the FACS Program Manager and the regional Deputy Attorney General regarding next appropriate steps. These steps may be taking the case to the local Multi-Disciplinary Team for assistance, or taking the situation to the local courts for judicial review.
- D. Team risk assessments when potential safety hazards exist. Respond with another worker or Supervisor/Team Lead. It may be appropriate to explore the possibility of the child being brought to the field office by an authorized caretaker, relative, or law enforcement agent, to be interviewed, rather than responding to the home until assistance can be coordinated to reduce the risk to the worker.
- E. Supervisors/Team Leads shall be aware of the location of their workers while in the field, particularly if the visit extends after hours.
- F. Cell phones shall be purchased for workers to use in the field. Consideration should be given to phones with safety features and the capability of working in more remote areas, i.e. GPS capabilities.
- G. Each field office will establish reporting/check-in guidelines for workers that fit the specific capabilities of the office. **For instance:**
1. Field offices may choose to have an established sign-out board in a confidential area, where workers can document specifics as to where they are and when they are scheduled to return. If a confidential area is not available, field offices may look to post white boards outside workers' doors and work spaces, where specifics of visits can be documented.
 2. Workers check in with the office at specific increments during visits that may present safety risks. In the event the worker does not call in at the scheduled time, a designated person calls them.
 3. Have pre-determined "code words" that can be used to indicate danger while not alerting those around the worker.

In the Field-After Leaving the Office:

- A. Always make sure others are aware of your location when you are in the field.
- B. Do not hesitate to ask for assistance from Law Enforcement, other workers, or your supervisor/team lead if feeling unsafe.
- C. Be aware of where you park the car, noting an exit plan. Park so that you will not be required to back up in order to leave the residence. Be prepared to leave quickly if needed.
- D. Have an adequate amount of gas in the car at all times.
- E. Know your office policy regarding vehicle safety, i.e. what to do in the event of a breakdown, flat tire, or other mechanical problem with the vehicle.
- F. Always lock the car, even when moving. Keep windows rolled up to the point where someone cannot put their arm inside the car. Lock your purse or other valuables in the trunk of the car.
- G. Be aware of your surroundings. Is the area isolated? Are there unknown people or vehicles parked around the residence?
- H. Be aware of your attire. For example, wear shoes that you can move quickly in if necessary. Be cautious when wearing jewelry, scarves, ties, etc. that can be potentially grabbed, and where you may be harmed. Wear Department ID on break-away lanyards. Carry as few items as possible on your person.
- I. When you knock on the door, listen to what may be going on at the residence. For example, is there fighting, crying, a dog barking, etc.? Stand to the side of the door, never directly in front of the door.
- J. Do not enter a residence without being welcomed in by the occupants. Never enter a residence where no one has responded and the door is unlocked or ajar. Do not walk around the residence looking in windows when no one answers the door.
- K. Be aware of how to exit the client home once they have invited you in.
- L. If invited to sit, be aware of where you sit, so you do not sit on sharp or wet items.
- M. Always wash your hands once you leave a home visit. Latex gloves and prepackaged towelettes will be made available within the regions and Department cars.
- N. Be aware. Know which situations are the most likely to heighten risk factors, such as a Child Protection action where children are removed from their home.

In the Office:

- A. Determine how to “flag” potentially dangerous families and individuals in the shared data system. For example, place the phrase “Potential Hazards” in the first line of the PI, as this appears on the global list of Presenting Issues and will be an indicator to read additional information included in that PI. ***Note: Service Integration will also provide additional ways to identify potential hazards across the various programs within the Department. This Standard will reflect these changes as they become known.***

- B. Know the building's safety procedures. Each building has a safety protocol for responding to hazards, including fire, bomb threats, and potentially threatening individuals.
- C. Follow OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) guidelines if you are exposed to needles (or other sharps) or bodily fluids. Immediately (as soon as possible) flood the exposed area with water, and clean the area with soap and water or a disinfectant. Report incident to your supervisor, and seek medical attention.
- D. Be aware of your office or meeting rooms, where staff conduct face-to-face meetings with clients. Does the room have 2 exits? If there is not a second exit, sit close to the door where you can leave quickly if needed. Are there potentially dangerous items in the room? Do not have paperweights, scissors, etc., available that someone could use as a weapon.
- E. Keep waiting time to a minimum when possible.
- F. Do not meet with anyone when alone in the office.
- G. Do not open suspicious packages that are unexpected and have no return address. Inform a supervisor who will then contact Law Enforcement for response.

Dealing with an Irate Client:

- A. Remain calm. Be aware of the tone of your voice, and consciously keep your voice low.
- B. Keep a safe distance between you and the client. Stand to the side of an individual, never directly in front of them. Never touch a client on the arm or shoulder to calm them. This may actually serve to escalate the situation.
- C. Remove yourself from the situation as soon as possible if you feel threatened. Ask for a cooling off time or reschedule. This also helps a client to regain composure and maintain their dignity.
- D. Use empathy when possible, however, do not say, "I understand..." This may again, serve to escalate an already tense situation.
- E. Show respect and sincerity.
- F. Do not tell the client what to do, or how you would handle a situation if you were them.
- G. Ask for assistance from Supervisor/Team Lead, another worker, or Law Enforcement when needed. Never hesitate to ask for help.

Following an Incident:

- A. Seek medical attention immediately if injury warrants this response (call 911 in an emergency). If medical attention is advised, but not an emergency, contact regional HR representative for designated medical providers.
- B. Notify your Supervisor/Team Lead as soon as possible.
- C. Supervisors will inform the regional Program Manager immediately upon being informed of a safety-related incident. In the event the Supervisor/Team Lead is unavailable, notify the regional Program Manager of the incident.

- D. Notify Law Enforcement if a worker is injured by a client and file appropriate reports.
- E. Document the incident fully in a Critical Incident Report and subsequent Supervisor's Accident Report if needed. These reports will be forwarded to the Program Manager. Consult Human Resources when warranted.
- F. When incidents involve clients, document in the narrative section in the client's file.
- G. Responses to stressful incidents are individualized based on personal experience and history. Supervisors will be available for debriefing. The Employee Assistance Program is also available to all employees, and shall be considered if appropriate.
- H. Worker safety training will be available to new staff, and ongoing worker safety training will be made available to experienced staff when requested.

Any variance to these standards will be documented and approved by Division administration, unless otherwise noted.